

The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

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“EMERGENT SPACES, CONTEMPORARY URBAN CONFLICTS”
Experiences of social mix in changing neighborhoods:
The case study Milan’s Chinatown.

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ABSTRACT

Few of the spaces of Milan are so strongly loaded with cultural and political baggage as "Chinatown" - the ethnic neighborhood on Paolo Sarpi Street - where a handful of roads, the global flow of Chinese goods and the daily routines of elderly people and families are merged. The complexity of the "Sarpi Question" is precisely determined by the discussion of social dimensions, space and Ethno-racial, economic and political, all at once.

In order to come to a deeper understanding of the economic mechanism of development of a city, this paper begins by examining the causes that led to the break of an apparent balance in the practices of local cohabitation of the Chinese District in Milan. This paper will also examine the relationship of power and conflict between the local government and the social groups, from the point of view of an urban change process. This framework deals with reclaiming urban space and the re-qualification processes aimed at improving the physical context of the Sarpi area, and especially at starting up processes of financial revitalization.

"No buses, no taxis, no cars and no trading. Why don't you just build a wall around us?" reads a banner displayed by traders on Sarpi Street in the 2008 Christmas season, the first month of controlled traffic flow. Ethnographic research attempts to explain how this result was reached.

The voice of Italian residents is only one of those emerging from the results of this research, along with those of business owners, city users and local politicians. It is an interplay between antagonism and juxtaposition in which I have tried to highlight the existing conflict with the aim of understanding and explaining the tension in this urban space. The paper concludes that cultural co-presence often produces a greater quantity of new meanings and forms inasmuch as it is provocative. It is true to say that the urban dimensions outlined by social mix and diversity do not represent a happy and idyllic model made up of different people, "but a way to look at the configurations of our society from the perspective of what people do and say they do, and are and say they are" (Semi 2007: 56).

KEYWORDS: urban regeneration, social mix, social diversity, local urban government, ethnography, Chinatown, Milan.

Word count: about 7,000.



*Fig. 1,
people on Paolo Sarpi Street.
Photo by Manfredi Marino*

INTRODUCTION

The 140,000 Chinese in Italy¹ are concentrated in Milan, Prato (a leather-working city near Florence), Rome, and in the surrounding area of Naples. Most of them came from Wenzhou in the eastern province of Zhejiang. The Chinese living in Milan have for some time now been regarded and described as a closed, silent, introverted and isolated community. The area of reference with the most ethnic connotations in this sense is Via Paolo Sarpi, Milan's Chinatown; it consists of a handful of streets where the global flow of Chinese goods and the daily routines of elderly people and families come together, but all of this has been impacted on by the arrival of wholesale trade in the nineties. The balance is broken by a constant flow of goods, vehicles, vans, trolleys, boxes, fumes and rubbish. Chaos overwhelms via Sarpi, as well as the adjacent thoroughfares. Co-habitation is at risk, wedged between the business needs of the Chinese community and the daily habits of residents, i.e. the Chinese work ethic based on breaking one's back for 16 hours a day, and the new zero tolerance Milanese outlook. Beneath the surface intolerance, exasperation and exhaustion are all simmering. On both sides, Italians and Chinese have been living side by side now for seventy years without any conflict up to April 12th, 2007, the first time ever that three hundred Chinese reacted violently against measures imposed by the public authorities.

This paper is part of an urban ethnographic research, which has been developed from an MA Thesis in Political and Social Communication at University of Milan, Italy. All the data have been collected from 2007 to 2009. They either derive from hundreds of hours of participant observations in the field, (the public and private spaces of Milan's Chinatown i.e., Paolo Sarpi district), or from the qualitative interviews (31 altogether collected among: residents and traders, both Italian and Chinese, and local politicians), and a set of audio-visual data (photographs and movies taken by the author). See Manzo Lidia K.C. (2009) and the “Data and Method Appendix” for a more detailed description of field access and methodology.

1. EMERGING SPATIALITY.

MILAN, PAOLO SARPI STREET: AN ETHNIC NEIGHBOURHOOD

The proximity of the Sempione Park to the historical centre of Milan and the fair zone, as well as post-war reconstruction, were the main causes that led to the gentrification of the neighbourhood where both lower and middle classes coexisted, and where now both Chinese immigrants and Milanese businessmen cohabit. The area, mostly inhabited by Chinese, is both residential and productive, and constitutes in this phase the “backstage” of the neighbourhood; it runs through some secondary streets like Via Rosmini, Via Giordano Bruno, Via Giusti, and Via Aleardi, which are minor transit points where housing includes laboratories in courtyards and basements. In addition, markets, bag shops, and restaurants abound with the developing of Chinese import-export. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, Chinese visibility increased and the internal structure of the neighbourhood changed:

The transformation of the Sarpi neighbourhood from a residential and craftsmen’s area into an ethnic area, which is characterized by a socially and economically complex structure, is still an on-going process, which often leads to internal conflicts due to social status diversity and different social needs²” (Novak 2002: 24).

The elaboration of data that were collected on the field in February 2009, which regard the census of trade activities in the Sarpi neighbourhood³, shows the increase of Chinese wholesale activities. This outcome is particularly remarkable when compared to other trade activities. Indeed, there is a balance between Chinese and Italian retail shops, while Italians prevail in the service industry.

Tab. 1, Trade activities in the Sarpi neighbourhood (February 2009). Percentage data (N=722).

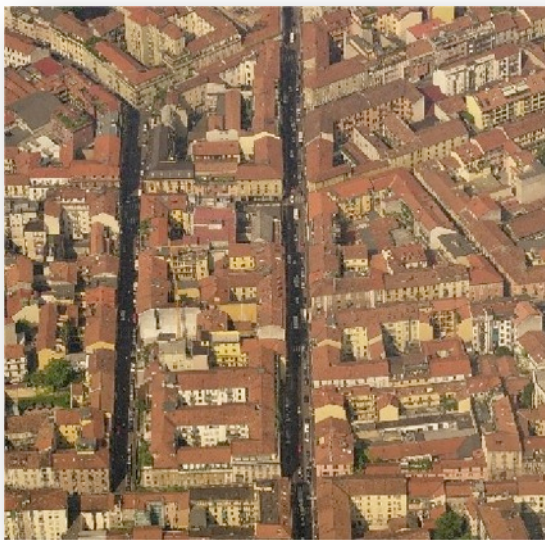
	Wholesale	Retail	Services
Italian	0	49,5	59,5
Chinese	100	50,5	40,5
Total	100	100	100

Source: Author’s elaboration on data collected by Lidia K.C. Manzo.

As Cologna emphasizes in a previous survey⁴, this is an impressive datum,

undermining the traditional function of the Sarpi neighbourhood for Chinese in Milan, once predominantly an area of services, a place for socialization and as well as a place of “symbolic domiciliation” for Chinese identity in the regional context. A great part of the customers in this area is not Chinese: they are Italians, Bangladeshi, Moroccans, and other hawkers or retailers of different nationalities, even foreigners such as French, Swiss, and Germans (Cologna 2008).

The Sarpi neighbourhood is decreasingly productive because of high rent prices, unavailability of spaces, growing intolerance of the residents, and increasing controls on Chinese trade as well as on road conditions. According to Novak (2002), the neighbourhood is rapidly evolving toward something more visible and deep-rooted as well as more stable and complex. It is not a mere place of residence, but a growing place of financial and service exchanges, trade, and both national and international relationships.



*Fig. 2, Paolo Sarpi Street, a view
Source: Municipality of Milan’s cartography.*

Moreover, the neighbourhood is characterized by the “dynamics of village”, with relationships among neighbours, trade, meetings, and sharing; at the same time, it is characterized by the “dynamics of global relations,” such as the international exchange of goods, information, capital and persons. Currently, the Sarpi neighbourhood features a great number of wholesale businesses. Over the years these have generated a range of traffic problems mainly linked to the unloading of goods, as well as issues pertaining to the co-habitation with the local Italian

population (an estimated 90 to 95%⁵). Therefore, as of the 17th of November 2008 the Municipal Authority of Milan established a limited access zone [Zona a Traffico Limitato, ZTL]. As a result only residents are allowed access and transit, though taxis and motorcycles are exempt from exclusion. So as to enforce such provisions, the local authorities have erected a network of CCTV cameras to monitor traffic. This process of urban transformation was politically interpreted as an attempt to eradicate Chinese wholesalers from the district.

We have taken these steps because we are convinced and we hope the Chinese will start to emigrate. (Riccardo De Corato, Deputy Mayor of Milan and security councillor.)

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2. TALKING ABOUT URBAN REGENERATION, SOCIAL MIX AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The urban regeneration process in the Paolo Sarpi neighbourhood provides the macrolevel context to study local policies about urban government and social mixes. An urban crisis may be considered a pivotal event, one able to put a problem into focus thanks to its evocative power. The problem may previously have been hidden, ignored, underestimated or neglected, and is now part of the political agenda. The main issue within the problem appears to be one of perception rather than of a concrete question of co-habitation. The issue of the Chinese becoming rooted and strengthening their visibility and dominating role in the area produces a defensive reaction on the part of the local population. As well as fearing that their neighbourhood may “disappear”, the local Milanese feel that their real estate interests may suffer and their lifestyle may be under threat (Novak 2002). But the great wall of Chinese discontent is also made up of the feelings of Italian citizens who feel betrayed and mocked by the Municipality who, according to them, “has not been able to govern through the changes”.

Via Paolo Sarpi is a social workshop in the heart of Milan, a micro-history allowing for a range of analytical frames, the first among which helps to understand the effects of the global economy, as Daniele Cologna explains⁶

At present Chinese wholesalers are responding to the demand for goods on the part of Street-sellers, markets and immigrants in general. They have located their businesses where there is greater traffic, i.e. where is most convenient for them. Once again, we are before a global challenge, that of creating a commercial platform for the distribution of goods originating from China.

Lanzani also highlights the far from marginal role that immigration plays within contexts of domestic transformation:

If we dwell mainly on generative processes, on evolutionary patterns and on the relations created within the geographical contexts hosting them, perhaps we are able to single out some rationale, I mean a range of evolutionary processes which appear more evident in their patterns during immigrants' settling process which do however impact the city and the contemporary area. We can, in other words, think of immigration as an extremely sensitive tool able to identify emerging spatiality and new protocols in spatial organisation rationale, singling out deep points of contact with some recent investigations on transformation taking place in the European arena (Lanzani 2003).

Following the sociospatial perspective, my approach analyses the real estate development as the “leading edge of changes in the metropolitan region,” considering more specifically that “politics to be highly linked to the concern of property development” (Gottdiener and Hutchinson 2006: 77).

Whether we consider city or suburban governments, the central feature of the local state – its ability to acquire wealth and channel social resources – has meant that organized interests must compete with one another for control. This struggle for control over urban and suburban settlement space provides the drama of local politics (Ibid: 236).

The political process analysed in the case study of Milan’s Chinatown seems operate as the “élite theory” of urban politics (Hunter 1953; Stone 1989). Moreover, this ethnographic research attempts to study how the mayor and city councillors of Milan made decisions on local political issues including social diversity and urban renewal. In fact, behind the local administration there is a select group of powerful and influential developers, or a “Milanese power structure”, that controls the city development toward its specific interests. However, there is another aspect that affects the question of power and control over urban space in the

Milanese Chinatown case study. Residents and dealers organized associations and movements to influence the local government. The concept, developed by Castells on urban social movements, described as “urban-orientated mobilizations that influence structural social change and transform the urban meanings” (1983: 305), can be adapted to this study to explore how communities’ associations (re)present *their* issues regarding *their* everyday lives in *their* neighborhood (Boyte 1980; Logan and Rabrenovic 1990).



Fig. 3, The urban conflict in Paolo Sarpi Street on april the 12th 2007.
Source: *Omnimilano News*.

These observations also suggest that there are many layers of the relationship between the way in which an urban space has been modified and the ways in which it is used. Regarding the Chinese presence in this Milanese neighborhood, these observations also suggest that “cultural habits leads immigrant to change the uses of existing spaces until they can create their own” (Krase 1993: 54). The past decade of immigration has already had a major impact on Italian identity and this

can be seen in its streetscapes. This is true not only because of the numbers of newcomers but also because of their visual differences with indigenous Italians. These racial (physical) and ethnic (cultural)

differences in their local practices have produced an even greater change in the “appearance” of some of Italy’s well-known urban landscapes (Krase 2007: 102).

As noted by Sciortino and Colombo (2004), there is a pattern to the spatial distribution of immigrants to Italian regions, which can be explained by “work opportunities, geographical proximity, national and local policies and, last but not least, networks” (2004:51).

3. CONTEMPORARY URBAN CONFLICTS

As Gottdiener and Hutchinson remark, despite the old saying ‘*You can’t fight city hall*’, “many people do just that” (2006: 241). According with Castells (1983), urban social movements are usually directed *against city hall*. The target of this movement was, again, the local Milanese government. The Sarpi “question” is made up of a range of contrasting voices, each witnessing constantly clashing interests. As we prepare to represent the conflict in the via Sarpi setting, we need to make a small detour, introducing a temporary change of scene: from the Chinese community to the Vice-Mayor, from an ethnically diverse neighbourhood to the heart of the Municipal Government of Milan. Vice-Mayor De Corato immediately makes me aware of his rhetorical dimension. His approach is an alarmist one. He states that the true issue of Europe and of the entire western world is the Chinese one. Not Romanians or Arabs, but the Chinese - as there are so many: one and a half billion.

There are many who arrive, who knows from where (?)... unless they arrive in the containers with the goods, and they bring over all kind of counterfeit stuff from China....not one original piece. Everything they sell is fake. (Riccardo De Corato)

However, this is clearly not only about a quantitative presence here, but the impact of the Chinese commercial and entrepreneurial system on the area.

Every day I work with 150 ethnic groups that are present in our city. The one I am most concerned about are the Chinese because they work hard. The others, some are idlers and a few are like us Europeans...the Arabs, there are like 80.000 Muslims...but still, can be managed.

But with the Chinese you can’t do anything...I even know some of them and I respect them. I think to myself: “shit... these people work hard. What can you do to them?” (Riccardo De Corato)

Now real political concern for the Chinese phenomenon is born. Countermeasures are sought but not identified, and in order to face an uncertain economic future, an appeal is made to the European institutions to see whether dumping against China is an option for the protection of the domestic market. Hairdressers present a clear example: Chinese salons will set your hair for €8 or even €6! This clearly has an impact on Italian establishments, as he described here with some worry:

in this way they destroy the Italian economy. They will soon be able to clone us and then sell us for half of the price, do you know what I mean? (Riccardo De Corato)

The Vice-Mayor's vision contrasts with that of the via Sarpi traders, fighting through ALES Associations to return the commercial interest of the past to the area. From an economical point of view, there are Chinese dealers who have the possibility of selling articles at really competitive prices, where in other areas of Milan the same products are sold for a price three times higher. As Walter the butcher says:

In the past, on Sarpi Street there were 12 butcher shops and each one of us was trying to do his best differentiating quality, product and price. We are not interested in through away Chinese shops: everyone is free to do as they wish! However, this presence makes our street more commercially appealing, and it is a road that can be a real economic market. (Walter, butcher on Paolo Sarpi Street)

3.1 RESISTANCE STRATEGIES AGAINST LOCAL POLICIES

According to Antonella Ceccagno, “one thing that must certainly be highlighted is that it is difficult to imagine any interest of the Chinese community as completely separate from those of the Italian one⁷”. But the “Italian question” is extremely complex. If we are to speak of Italians, we shall have to distinguish at least three main interest groups feeding the same number of local trends: residents, traders and those who use the area and the services it provides. In 2005, the *Vivisarpi* Association was founded by the neighbourhood committee established 6 years earlier. To date the organization has 150 members. I was given the chance to speak to its President, Pier Franco, a smart middle-aged man at the helm of this independent front against Chinese wholesale trade. Everything began with the first Chinese wholesaler settlements in Bramante Street. That street already had problems, as the tram rails didn't allow for parking there. There were some shops that had been shut for a while and

some deposits. In 1999, the Chinese suddenly bought all the shops and changed them into wholesale warehouses. The general picture is always that of alarm and restlessness,

in that period, big trucks stopped right in the middle of the road every day to unload goods. These unclear signs of change created a situation of alert in the district and that’s when people got together. A 600-people assembly took place, in which the Mayor Moratti took part, together with Mr De Corato and the Municipal Police chief, Mr Bezzon. It lasted from 9.00 pm until 12.30 a.m. During that time frustration exasperation and anger were expressed towards the situation and against the municipality. (Pier Franco, President of Vivisarpi Association, fight for the resident rights)



Fig. 4, A protest march of the Italian residents against the local policies. Sarpi Street, Dec. 1st, 2007. Source: www.vivisarpi.it

But the main backbone of the Chinese diaspora in Milan is certainly work, and more specifically entrepreneurial and freelance work aimed at a high level of financial gain. Overlooking this would mean to seriously misunderstand the meaning of the Chinese migration experience. The daily life of a Chinese family is truly imbued by the goal of working and earning, and reaching the independence that owning a business may bring. These values are the basis of the complex ethnic economies behind Chinese diaspora in the west, and this includes Milan (Breveglieri and Lanzani 1997). Chinese entrepreneurs have slowly replaced the artisan craft shops, which, partly due to changing markets and partly to the loss of the father-to-son transmission of skills, were closing down fast. So cobblers, upholsterers, furniture makers and restorers, frame makers and barbers and so on have given up their spaces and

often their licenses, too. After this, the Chinese realised that this new settlement area was not ideal: roads were narrow, parking spaces difficult to come by, and this along with other limits imposed by the Municipal Administration made trade increasingly difficult. The discourse that in a sense blew up last year is connected to exactly this: the fact that all of the Chinese wholesalers started to get fined. Therefore Chinese traders began to feel persecuted, and JIanyi also (a member of AssoCina⁸) confirms that:

These series of fines and prohibitions came from one day to the next and all of the Chinese businessmen found themselves facing difficulties that didn't use to be there at the start. (Jianyi, member of AssoCina).

The notion of “thresholds of tolerance”, one largely evoked in similar situations, here too reveals its ideological and prejudicial features. Responding exclusively to issues of public safety and subservience, and to attempt to hide migration phenomena, it proves ineffective at managing the range of social, economic and town-planning meanings that any territorial concentration process entails. The revolt of 2007 is a result of this unease, linked to the fact that sanctions were continually imposed precisely on all those actions and activities that Chinese wholesale trade required.

Italian dealers, for example...the ones that load and unload dairy products were completely ignored by the police even if they used hand-carts to go around while the Chinese were systematically blocked, and fined.
When ethnic factors come into play with commercial interests, the risk that is created is very dangerous... explosive! (Jianyi)

Moreover, the neighbourhood doesn't have any public areas. It is mainly made up of densely packed roads and the only real large public area is Paolo Sarpi Street, which has always been a commercial Street of the district and a historical meeting point. In addition, when you speak about Chinatown, the large districts of Chinese settlement come to mind, where all the shops, the residents and people on the Streets are Chinese. Instead, in Paolo Sarpi Street, the 95% of the resident population are Italian, with the minority being Chinese:

The separation between the ground floor and the highest floors is what creates the real problem of cohabitation. The first one is almost completely Chinese, in terms of

use and attendance and the second one is almost completely Italian. (Christian Novak, town planner, Professor at the University “Politecnico di Milano”)

This wouldn't have occurred if our Chinatown had been put together as the ones in the States, where most of the residents are Chinese, as well as the traders and the visitors of the area. The third antagonist between the needs of residents and the Public authority's policies is the trader's group. Here too, the situation is far from simple. More than 180 traders are represented by Associazione Liberi Esercenti Sarpi (ALES), where more than half are Chinese;

For the ALES association we are all traders, and we don't make a difference. We are all traders, all working families, on different levels and with different mentalities... we certainly don't want to create differences. For me, a person who works is a person to be respected... So, today trading is forbidden, why? Because of “our esteemed residents” who want to walk around in the Street. We are not in agreement with this, and we find it absurd and unacceptable for the future of a Milan in the 2015 Expo. (Walter)

The rationale behind the idea of pedestrianizing is twofold: firstly, it aims at reclaiming Street furniture, and secondly, at reducing the use of the district as a logistics platform for Chinese wholesalers. This is how the Councillor begins to describe the problem. He welcomes me into his office at the *Urban Center*, housed within the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele where the department for the renewal of the City of Milan are located. From the rarefied heights of the Town Planning chair, here is Masseroli's Sarpi plan:

So we have a neighbourhood that has been transformed in a span of fifteen years from that of one of the most attractive commercial streets in the city to one of the most chaotic in the city; completely out of control from city organizational point of view. (Carlo Masseroli, Assessor, town councillor in urban policy)

The Councillor knows that he cannot count on legislation to pursue his cuts on wholesale activities in such a dense area. Therefore, he has resorted to “a kind of scheme consisting of a range of measures to improve conditions in the neighbourhood”, as he puts it. The opinion of Vice-Mayor De Corato is even more bluntly articulated, as he explains that his Council has decided for traffic closure in via Sarpi with the belief that the Chinese will begin to emigrate as “they can't stay there”. And he adds to this that:

Now, Paolo Sarpi Street is a pedestrian area (and they [the traders] didn't understand this small footway... It's not that they didn't understand, because if you and I understood it means that they also understood.. because we are not that...)

Now, what is the declared purpose of the pedestrian area? It is to make the Chinese wholesale activities go away.

Why did we do it? Not because we wanted to increase the air quality in Paolo Sarpi Street but because we want to get rid of these Chinese. If they don't understand this, what are we supposed to do? (Riccardo De Corato)

Naturally the traders have understood this step as well and are all the more vexed. They say they will do their very worst and shall protest against these measures. Retailers especially, both Italian and Chinese, speak about a real blow due to the difficulties encountered by clients following the traffic ban for non-residents. ALES, the traders' association, is basically talking about an abuse of power on the part of the Milan Municipality. Remo, the President of ALES, is very clear about it:

The city got mad with us (the traders) although we have nothing to do with the wholesale. As you know, we started to consider this problem and to listen to everyone before anything else. They forced us to say. “prohibition of vehicles circulation or pedestrianization?” At this point I was shocked. (Remo, President of the dealer Association “ALES”)

In conclusion, we could say that the local communities association were capable of showing the ambiguous nature of the Milan city government, probably driven from the “élite” developers' interests. In any case, these social movements constituted a form of politics, ready to fight for their everyday neighbourhood practices.



Fig. 5, Protest murals in Sarpi neighbourhood: look at the claim “Rivolta Ovunque: Revolt everywhere”, at the hand without the thumb, and at the Chinese with a work cart. April, 2011.
Photo by Lidia K.C. Manzo

4. TOWARDS THE GENTRIFICATION OF PAOLO SARPI STREET

There is a great buzz around the Sarpi neighbourhood in the context of the outlook regarding the next 2015 Expo fair. Many initiatives are being considered, and these are aimed at transforming and giving value to the surrounding area in the direction of Fiera City⁹. This certainly is whetting the appetite of both residents, who would see an increase in the value of their homes, and speculators always have their ear to the ground, too. The urban crisis also arose because of a lack of clarity with respect to the future: unless the dynamics engendering a change of skin and soul in these neighbourhoods becomes clear, “those against the changes will easily be able to identify scapegoats. And those espousing the change are prone to forgetting - and making others forget - the responsibilities such a potentially huge change brings” (Inti, 2006, 157). Furthermore, the effect of new selection dynamics different to trade ones (no to wholesale and yes to retail), in the face of new elite residents promoted by the political and economic system, will certainly create a new interpretation of these spaces.

The reflections on urban commerce in the Sarpi neighbourhood interweaves with the starting up processes of a financial renaissance. In short, a gentrification of the neighbourhood is sought.

During this process the district has lost its working class connotation. This is one of the problems connected to Chinese and Italian cohabitation. Gentrification is not the only thing with a hard aspect because here in Italy and not in the USA, it affects properties. Here, people who bought their houses in the 80s and 90s made a strong investment, spent a lot of money and so are very determined in preserving their investments. That’s why they fight hard against everything that could decrease their investment value or lower their quality of life. (Novak)

Councillor Masseroli does not appear to be shocked by possible future gentrification scenarios:

Yes, if you want we can talk about gentrification with the Chinese community, however it was something inertial. I mean, the local government aims to provide incentives and create pathways.

We want the creative and young people of Milan.

I say that the real challenge for a city is to be able to offer strong attractive conditions. (Carlo Masseroli)

Thus, the gentrification would be configured as a young, upper-middle class university-educated population who may choose to dwell in a neighbourhood of a recent ethnic past that is now looking onto new opportunities given by the pedestrian area, such as the “*movida*” (nightlife-centric) of the Milanese clubs has already been evident in the closing by Garibaldi-Brera area, all shrouded in a halo of emerging cosmopolitan promise.

A pedestrian island characterized by stone pavements, benches... But the residents also expect something else. They expect paths, planted trees, green areas and, above all, tranquillity, silence and something that is much more similar to project-rendering than to reality. Not only that. It could become, with time, a place where you could re-establish nightlife, which today is quite weak. And if we think about what pedestrian islands have become in the Navigli area in just few months, and what cohabitation problems these create, this is for sure one of the things that residents don't expect and would never want from the pedestrianization. (Christian Novak).

An interesting comparison is made when we look at the problems emerging in districts where night life is lived out by some, and the needs of residents weigh on the other part of the equation: the former are a different tribe, arriving in the evening just to have fun, and have no interest in the abuse or at least intensive use of public space. They are not mindful of soiling or being noisy, and they are not concerned with a space they do not consider theirs, exactly because they do not live there and cannot see the spectacle of abandoned beer bottles at dawn! Another idea is to create a more picturesque commercial district that incorporates the characteristics of the neighbourhood, with specific shops, like the “Cappelleria Melegari¹⁰”, or other shops that existed before but also are innovative, mixing a bit with some quality ethnic trade. As Zukin (1989) emphasizes, using preservation rather than new construction constitutes an alternative strategy for the revalorization of the historic heritage of a district. In her recent book, *Naked City*, Zukin focuses attention on “a gentrifier’s aesthetic appreciation of urban authenticity” (2010: 18), but regarding the power of banks and real estate companies, “the importance of capital in the broadest sense”: the economic, social as well as the “cultural capital of gentrifiers ... who find their subjective identity in this particular image of urban authenticity” (Zukin 2010:18).

“What happens now, she said, is powerful and breathtakingly fast — a product of upper-middle-class aesthetics, and newspapers, magazines and blogs that compete to find new destination neighborhoods”¹¹.



Fig. 6. The pedestrianization process in Paolo Sarpi Street, April, 2011.
Photo by Lidia K.C. Manzo

The voice of Vice-Mayor De Corato even echoes the ancient artisan vocation of Paolo Sarpi:

So, retail traders, retail craft I believe being the best vocation for Paolo Sarpi Street. Some residence, the same ones, otherwise...
It needs to go back to what it was during the *Borgh di Scigolatt*, when retail craft prevailed, and I’m not talking about furniture crafts, I’m talking about craftsmanship. There is a vocation on that street, but the problem is the Chinese: if we don’t send a few away where are the craftsmen supposed to go? (Riccardo De Corato)

The game is still well underway.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This empirical research was done to observe a process of urban transformation taking place as political and cultural gentrification of an urban context, while at the same time building the social construction of stereotypes and prejudice. At the beginning of this paper we discuss what and how the Chinese settlement on Sarpi Street has contributed to the preservation of the urban fabric of this neighborhood which is historically characterized by a mix of functions for housing, production and sales.

The process of expulsion of the Chinese population justified precisely in the name of the ancient cultural heritage and of the recovery of the "Italian" identity neighborhood, would deny the substance of any part of the history of people and places who helped transform and create it, giving the city empty spaces, emptied of meaning” (Monteleone e Manzo 2010:161).

The political discourse represented in the ethnographic report precisely highlights how the manipulation of racial ideology on the part of institutions may support and keep our social and spatial categories alive. As Hannerz (1992) states, in the cultural swirl of cities, clashes may contribute to cultural vitality through the idea that juxtaposition may help tear down dogmas and allow outlooks to be fine-tuned. In fact, in this case study we observed how “metropolitan growth is the outcome of negotiations and contending interests, rather than the product of some well-oiled machine without conflict” (Gottdiener and Hutchinson 2006: 80). Cultural co-presence often produces a greater quantity of new meanings and forms inasmuch as it is provocative. We can say that the urban dimensions outlined by multiculturalism do not represent a happy and idyllic model made up of different people,

but a way to look at the configurations of our society from the perspective of what people do and say they do, and are and say they are (Semi 2007: 56).

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APPENDIX: DATA AND METHOD

The primary methods of data collection in this study are ethnographic observations and in-depth interview in the neighborhood. The use of multiple methods will facilitate the triangulation of the project's findings from a variety of vantage points (Lofland et al. 2005). The knowledge of the ethnographic field was formed during these last ten years, and gradually consolidated to become more and more in depth. Some key events have led me to the final access to the field. In fact, since 2001 I have been worked for Milan and I helped perform the population and business census in that area. At that time had a picture in my mind: the image of a complex, layered and multifaceted urban scene. Over the years I attended this setting as an observer. I saw, over time, a lively, colored and multicultural neighborhood with increased traffic generated by the Chinese wholesales. I also saw insults, pushing, beatings and protest marches during the first revolt of the Chinese community. It was the 12nd of April 2007. Since then I have never "abandoned" the field.

At the very beginning of the empirical research, I set as a first goal to deepen my references regarding the recent history of the district; in the meanwhile I was observing the urban space to gain a preliminary understanding of the dynamics that led to an event so disruptive of the social order. Moreover, because in that period I was working as a journalist in the press office of the City Hall, I was able to intercept some political designs about the re-development of the "Chinatown" area. The enviable vantage point as insider into the headquarter of the local Milanese government allowed me to establish profitable relationships with the secretaries of the mayor staff and its councillors. In fact, thanks to my colleagues I had free access to interviews with politicians. Furthermore, in early 2008, taking part in a neighborhood visit organized by a local association and advertised in the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, I built my first shy contacts with the gatekeepers of the neighborhood (more specifically, two local Italians and one local Chinese trader and members of the local dealers association -Ales- and the head of the association of young second-generation Chinese in Milan). Finally, in March 2008 I had my first official access to the field. I began building my network of contacts through these immediate gatekeepers, and through them I met residents and users from various parts of the neighborhood.

In all cases I revealed my status as a researcher and explained to the residents that I was interested in studying the process of urban transformation. In addition to my face-to-face interactions with the Paolo Sarpi people, I also regularly visited the online association blogs to observe the interactions among residents and dealers, and the types of issues that are

discussed at the board.

Beyond the ethnographic observations, I interviewed thirty-one persons among residents and non-residents who worked in the neighborhood, Chinese and Italian dealers, privileged witnesses and local politicians. The interviewees were selected to represent the diversity of the community, racial or ethnic background, and occupation. The first fifth of the interviews were conducted in 2007, at the beginning of the research, and the remaining interviews were conducted in 2008. The interviews lasted on average of about 75 minutes, and they were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis.

During the observation and interviews I took pictures of the most interesting aspects of the neighborhood, its edges and defining characteristics. At the same time I shot, sometimes with the help of a camera assistant, some preliminary movies. My approach to visual sociology does not consider the images in the marginal role as additional documents or pictures, but as a source of relevant data, and as a tool and part of the research process, by capturing the specificity and the evocative power of interpretation of the data. The social documentary¹², which arose together with the MA thesis, in fact, provides a way for ethnographers to explore the cultural representations applied to the field of social research.

ENDNOTES

¹ Source: Associna, Associna, Association of the Chinese second generation in Italy www.associna.com

² [Author’s translation]

³ Personal survey conducted between January and February 2009, two months after the municipality order of 17 November 2008, which limits car transit in via Paolo Sarpi.

⁴ Daniele Cologna is charter member of the Agenzia Codici, which conducted a survey in October 2007 on trade activities in Sarpi Neighborhood, under the supervision of doc. Alberto Demarchi.

⁵ Source: Vivisarpi, Association by the neighbourhood committee and Associna, Association of the Chinese second generation in Italy.

⁶ Source: “Chinatown, niente trasloco. Gli abitanti presi in giro” on the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* on October the 11th 2007.

⁷ Source “Chinatown - La "rivolta" dei migranti di successo” on www.meltingpot.org on April the 30th 2007.

⁸ AssoCina is a non profit Association, formed by and to support second generation Chinese in Italy.

⁹ FieraMilano City is the new large-scale exhibition centre in the outskirts of Milan (Rho), where will be located the World Expo 2015.

¹⁰ “Cappelleria” is a shop which sells traditional hats, also handmade.

¹¹ Powell, Michael. “A Contrarian’s Lament in a Blitz of Gentrification.” *New York Times*. 19 Feb. 2010. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/21/nyregion/21gentrify.html>>

¹² The author has shot a documentary film, VIA |da| PAOLO SARPI [A-way from Paolo Sarpi] (an ethnographical reportage from the Milan’s Chinatown - the ethnically connoted District of Paolo Sarpi Street - where a handful of roads, the global flow of Chinese goods and the daily routines of elderly people and families are merged) 49 minutes, color, En subt.